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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/06/2028
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [CASC](#) [KISL](#) [KWMN](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS POLICE ARREST/RELEASE AMERICAN-SAUDI
BUSINESSWOMAN FOR "SECLUSION WITH A MAN"

Classified By: Consul General Tatiana C. Gfoeller for Reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S) SUMMARY: The Saudi religious police arrested and later released on February 4 an American-Saudi businesswoman for allegedly being in seclusion with an unrelated man at a Riyadh Starbucks. Yara Anabtawi contacted U.S. Consulate General Jeddah the morning of February 5, after English daily newspaper Arab News published an interview detailing her treatment by the religious police. She informed PolOff that she had been searched, held incomunicado, and forced to sign a confession. After no longer fearing for her physical safety, she met with the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) to file a complaint. However, the NSHR informed PolOff that they could only request that the religious police clear Ms. Anabtawi of the charges and provide her with an apology. In Jeddah, news of the case spread quickly among Saudi businesswomen. Many considered the case horrible, highlighting how women in Jeddah do not face the same restrictions as women in Riyadh and advocating greater awareness among women of their rights. END SUMMARY.

AMERICAN-SAUDI BUSINESSWOMAN "TRAUMATIZED" BY ARREST

12. (S) While on a business trip to Riyadh to visit her company's new office on February 4, the Saudi religious police arrested Yara Anabtawi for "khulwa" (being in seclusion with a man who is not her relative). She spent several hours at Riyadh's Malaz Prison where she stated the religious police performed a physical search, fingerprinted her, prevented her from contacting her husband, and forced her to sign a confession. Yara Anabtawi later contacted the U.S. Consulate General Jeddah out of concern for her physical safety, after having read an Arab News article detailing her treatment and arrest. The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) has not responded to inquiries about her case but CPVPV Riyadh Office Acting Director Sheikh Othman Al-Othman stated that "they will reply to those questions later." Yara returned to Jeddah on February 5 where a doctor treated her for trauma. Her husband, Hatim Anabtawi, stated that he is "angry," and described the Mutaww'a as "thugs."

NATIONAL SOCIETY FOR HUMAN RIGHTS: THERE WERE MANY VIOLATIONS

13. (S) Vice President of the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) for the Mecca Region, Aljawhara Alanqari, met with Yara and Hatim Anabtawi the afternoon of January 6. After Yara reported to the NSHR the details of her treatment and arrest, the Society said that they would seek an apology from the religious police and request that they clear her "file." Aljawhara added that they would submit information on Yara's case to NSHR legal consultants so that they could determine the extent of the violations. However, Aljawhara confirmed that there were many violations, including the

Mutaww'a forcing Yara to accompany him without her male guardian and prohibiting her from calling her husband while at the Riyadh prison.

JEDDAWI BUSINESSWOMEN REACTION: SURPRISED AND HORRIFIED

¶4. (S) Prominent businesswomen in Jeddah reacted negatively to news of Yara Anabtawi's arrest and anticipated that it would continue to stir-up ill will toward the Mutaww'a. Fatin Bundagji, Institutional Development Consultant and activist for women's issues, said that Yara's treatment and arrest were "absolutely horrific." She added: "They (Mutaww'a) do not have the right to arrest her" and speculated that Yara's case will attract a lot of "OpEd feedback." Another contact, Jeddah Economic Forum Marketing Board member Rasha Hefzi, stated that she was very surprised to learn of Yara's arrest. She said that it was normal for Jeddawi women to interact with men in public but that women in Riyadh face greater restrictions.

¶5. (S) Basmah Omair, Executive Director of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry's Businesswomen Center, stated that the arrest was "horrible" and was pleased that it had gained international media coverage. (NOTE: Agence France published an article on February 5. END NOTE.) She also argued that the Mutaww'a had no right to arrest Yara, stating that the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice interpret "khulwa" (a man and a woman in seclusion with the possibility of adultery) as "mingling," which she defined as a man and a woman interacting in a public space. As a result, she asserted, the SAG needs to differentiate between "khulwa" and "mingling," as well as educate women on their rights.
GFOELLER